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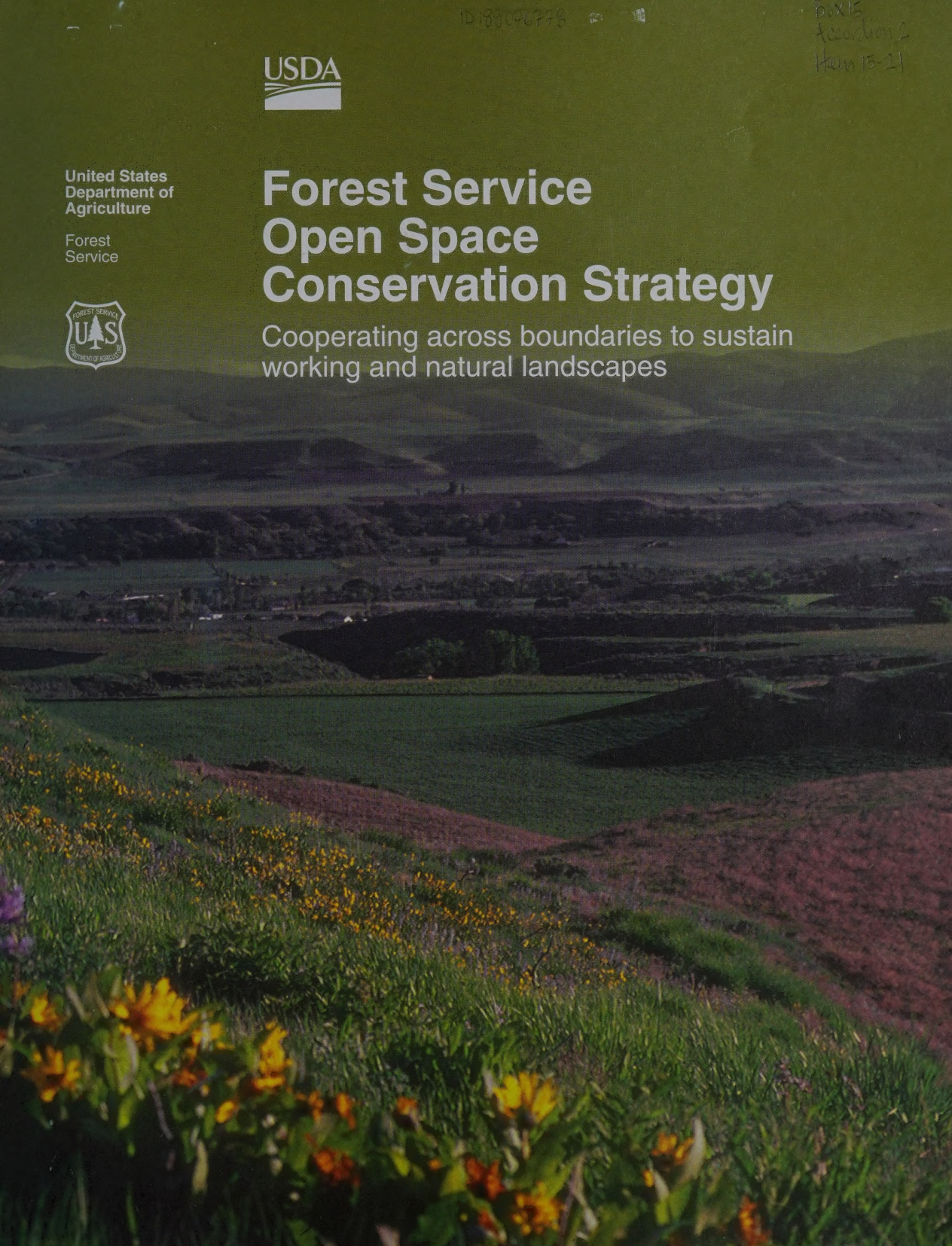
Forest Service Open Space Conservation Strategy

Cooperating across boundaries to sustain working and natural landscapes



Forest Service
Open Space Conservation Strategy

Cooperating across boundaries to sustain working and natural landscapes

Open space—forests, grasslands, farms, ranches, wetlands, riparian areas, and urban greenspaces—provides vital ecosystem services and benefits for society. Each day, we lose 6,000 acres of open space in the United States as more people choose to live at the urban fringe and in scenic, rural areas. While growth and development provide homes, jobs, and other positive benefits for society, where and how we grow impacts the sustainability of natural systems and the overall quality of life for Americans.

The mission of the Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. We cannot fulfill this mission without addressing the rapid loss of open space. Development of open space affects our ability to manage the national forests and grasslands, as well as our ability to help private landowners and communities sustainably manage their land to maintain private and public benefits and ecosystem services.

At stake is the ability of private and public forests and rangelands to provide clean water, scenic beauty, biodiversity, outdoor recreation, natural-resource-based jobs, forest products, and carbon sequestration. Development in many parts of the country—including growth adjacent to the national forests and grasslands—increases the risk of wildfire for people and property, raises the cost and risk of fighting fires, contributes to the spread of invasive species, increases conflicts among recreational users, reduces access to recreation lands, and fragments fish and wildlife habitat.

What Is Open Space?

Open space describes land that is valued for natural processes and wildlife, agricultural and forest production, aesthetic beauty, active and passive recreation, and other public benefits. Such lands include working and natural forests, rangelands and grasslands, farms, ranches, parks, stream and river corridors, and other natural lands within rural, suburban, and urban areas. Open space may be protected or unprotected, public or private.

Open Space Benefits:

- Clean Air and Water
- Water Supplies
- Natural Flood Control
- Food
- Timber, Forage, and Other Products
- Wildlife Habitat and Corridors
- Endangered Species Recovery
- Climate Regulation
- Scenic Beauty
- Recreation Opportunities and Access
- Community Revitalization
- Improved Human Health
- Opportunities To Connect Youth With Nature
- Increased Property Values

The Forest Service currently works with partners to conserve open space across the country by managing 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands; conducting research and technological development; and providing technical, financial, and educational assistance to landowners and communities. Our programs, expertise, and authorities historically have helped conserve open space and can continue to help in the future. Our role is not to regulate development or land use, but to work with States, communities, landowners, and others to strategically conserve open space across the landscape.

Our vision for the 21st century is an ***interconnected network of open space across the landscape that supports healthy ecosystems and a high quality of life for Americans.*** Fully realized, this network will include sustainably managed private forests and rangelands, national forests and grasslands, other public land, riparian areas and wildlife corridors, and urban greenspaces. Private and public open spaces will complement each other across the landscape to provide ecosystem services, wildlife habitat, recreation opportunities, and sustainable products.

Thanks to the dedication and energy of landowners, communities, nonprofit organizations, public agencies, corporations, and other conservationists across the country, the Nation has already made great strides towards this vision. More work needs to be done, though, to sustain healthy ecosystems and to ensure that current and future generations can enjoy open space, whether in the city or in remote wildlands.

This strategy outlines national priorities to help the Forest Service be a more effective partner in open space conservation. The strategy provides a framework to focus existing and new Forest Service actions for open space conservation. It provides guidance for Forest Service units and employees to fully utilize resources and skills from all parts and levels of the agency and to improve coordination across the agency. The strategy supports the Conserve Open Space goal in the agency's strategic plan.

The strategy emphasizes collaborative approaches and partnerships. Working together across the agency with partners, the Forest Service can make lasting contributions to the protection and stewardship of the Nation's open spaces.

Our Goal: Conserve Open Space

Sustain the environmental, social, and economic benefits of forests and grasslands across the landscape by:

- **Protecting** the most ecologically and socially important lands;
- **Conserving** working lands as sustainable forests and grasslands;
- **Expanding** and connecting open spaces in cities, suburbs, and towns; and
- **Reducing** the potential ecological impacts and risks of development.

Priority Actions

Four priorities will guide Forest Service action into the future:

A. Convene partners to identify and **protect** priority open space.

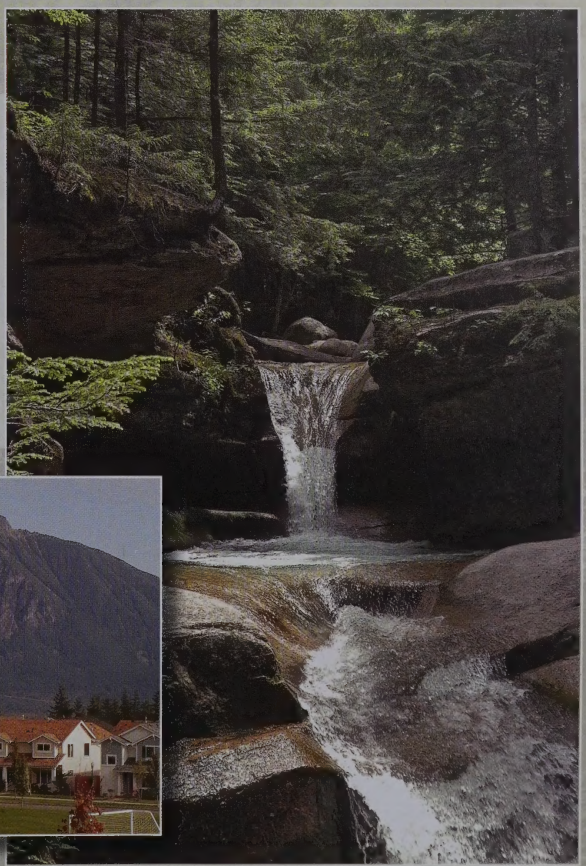
B. Promote national policies and markets to help private landowners **conserve** open space.

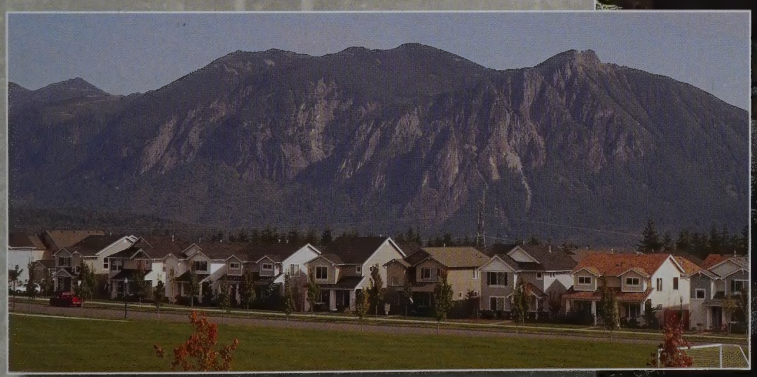
C. Provide resources and tools to help communities **expand** and connect open spaces.

D. Participate in community growth planning to **reduce** ecological impacts and wildfire risks.

Thirteen supporting actions will help us meet these priorities. The actions emphasize our roles as a policy advisor at the national level, a convener at the regional level, and an information provider and stakeholder at the local level. The actions are supported by authorities in the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act, National Forest Management Act, and Wyden Amendment, among other legislation. All of the actions will be implemented through partnerships and collaboration with others.

The Forest Service respects private property rights and local jurisdiction over land use and will only work with willing landowners, States, and local governments to implement this strategy. Our objective is to facilitate, encourage, and galvanize voluntary land conservation to help ensure that forests and grasslands across the landscape can continue to provide valued services and benefits for society.





A. Convene partners to identify and protect priority open space

1 Conduct a rapid science-based assessment of open space change to inform priorities.

- Work with partners to conduct a rapid assessment of open space change.
- Project land uses, extent of open space loss, and ecosystem conditions to define the emerging national and regional hotspots of open space change.
- Build on existing information from the Forest Service's Renewable Resources Planning Act Assessment, Forest Inventory and Analysis program, Scenery Management System, Forests on the Edge project, Spatial Analysis project, and regional assessments like the Southern Forest Resource Assessment.
- Incorporate assessment information from other agencies, States, universities, and conservation organizations, such as State forest resource assessments, State wildlife action plans, and ecoregional assessments.

2 Convene partners and stakeholders to identify regional priority lands.

- Convene or participate in existing discussions with other Federal agencies, States, regional councils, county and municipal governments, landowners, nonprofit organizations, recreation users, land trusts, developers, and other stakeholders at regional levels to identify priority lands for conservation.
- Reach out to and include nontraditional partners, such as corporations, smart growth advocates, health organizations, youth groups, minority and underserved populations, and religious organizations, to incorporate views from varied perspectives and interests.
- Share information from the national rapid assessment, regional assessments, and other scientific studies to help identify lands under threat of conversion with high ecological, social, and economic value.

3 Protect regional priority lands through partnerships and mechanisms such as land acquisition and conservation easements.

- Work with willing landowners and other partners to protect regional priority lands through land acquisitions, conservation easements, land exchanges, donations, and other conservation mechanisms.
- Help protect priority lands through the Land and Water Conservation Fund and Forest Legacy programs. Streamline land adjustment and acquisition processes to improve the agency's ability to protect lands within National Forest System boundaries under high development pressure.
- Work with partners to leverage non-Federal funds and contributions, and to spur private conservation efforts that complement Federal investments.
- Coordinate with other Federal, State, local, and nongovernmental land acquisition and easement programs to link protected areas and leverage Federal investments.

B. Promote national policies and markets to help private landowners conserve open space

4 Identify where changes in tax and other Federal policies could provide economic incentives and remove barriers for open space conservation.

- Study the impact of Federal policies on the ability of family and industrial landowners to maintain open space and the ability of communities to plan for and conserve open space.
- Develop options for new and modified Federal tax policies that could help landowners afford to own and maintain forests and rangelands, as well as transfer their land to the next generation.
- Provide ideas for how other Federal policies could be modified through legislative or executive action to help conserve open space.

5 Support the development of emerging ecosystem service markets to encourage private investments in open space conservation.

- Advance and support market-based approaches to the conservation and enhancement of ecosystem services, such as water-quality trading, conservation banking, and carbon-credit trading.
- Focus research efforts on valuation of benefits; measurement, monitoring, and verification protocols; and market-based project design.
- Sponsor pilot programs and demonstration projects that test and evaluate market mechanisms.
- Broaden partnerships to promote a collective awareness of ecosystem services and market opportunities.

6 Encourage natural-resource-based industries to provide economic incentives for landowners to retain working land.

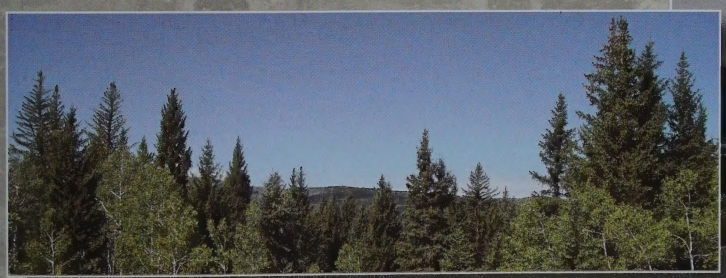
- Support the development and expansion of new markets for sustainable forest and rangeland products, including woody biomass energy production.
- Provide assistance to help sustain existing forest-based markets and products.
- Provide assistance and supportive policies to help public land ranchers maintain viable ranching businesses and continue owning the private ranch lands associated with their National Forest System grazing permits.
- Share information with landowners on the economic advantages of combining sustainable forestry and agriculture practices.

7 Support recreation and tourism uses to generate revenue for landowners and communities from open space lands.

- Promote the expansion of nature-based tourism and outdoor recreation industries to provide revenue and jobs from open space lands.
- Identify policy changes and incentives to encourage landowners to provide recreation and nature-tourism opportunities on private land and access to public lands.

8 Provide and encourage landowner assistance and incentives to help keep working lands working.

- Continue working with State forestry agencies to provide forestry assistance to landowners to improve the economics of private forest management and promote sustainable forest management.
- Develop and disseminate forestry resources for landowners with emphasis on outreach to new and future owners.
- Work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service; Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service; and other Federal agencies to expand education, outreach, technical assistance, cost-share, and other Federal incentives for forest and range landowners.
- Coordinate with other agencies to deliver complementary, efficient, and customer-centric services for landowners.



C. Provide resources and tools to help communities expand and connect open spaces

9 Provide urban forestry assistance to communities to enhance and restore open space within cities, suburbs, and towns.

- Share urban forestry and agroforestry techniques and tools that can help restore and enhance open spaces in developed areas.
- Continue working with municipalities to establish and maintain local urban forestry programs.
- Share research findings with county and municipal governments on the importance of accessible open space for human health, child development, and community well-being.

10 Develop tools to help communities strategically connect open spaces to build a functioning green infrastructure.

- Develop and share information and tools to help local leaders and planners strategically protect parks, riparian areas, source water protection areas, and wetlands to build an interconnected green infrastructure that provides ecosystem services and recreation opportunities for urban and suburban citizens.
- Expand existing green infrastructure training and workshops for local planners.
- Identify and share forestry practices to help control stormwater runoff, connect forest fragments, and improve wildlife habitat in urban and rural communities.

D. Participate in community growth planning to reduce ecological impacts and wildfire risks

11 Support and participate in local, regional, and transportation planning to conserve open space and retain ecosystem benefits.

- Develop new science-based tools to help communities consider and use landscape-level natural resource information in their planning, as well as visualize and evaluate future options for landscape change.
- Train employees on how to engage in local, regional, and transportation planning in a constructive manner that respects local authority and decisionmaking.
- In communities adjacent to national forests and grasslands, participate in planning discussions as a stakeholder and provide information on how growth decisions will affect public land resources and public access.
- Continue including local communities in National Forest System planning to help coordinate local land use and national forest plans.

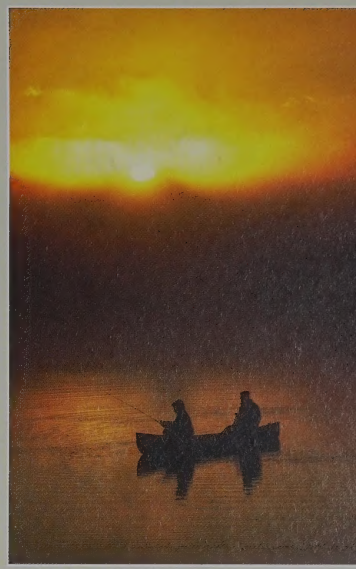
12 Work with communities to plan for and reduce wildfire risks.

- Identify and map wildfire risks and open space values to help communities develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans and guide new development away from high-risk areas and places that are difficult to protect.
- Continue outreach efforts to communities, developers, homeowner associations, and individual homeowners to implement Firewise and other mitigation practices to reduce risk of wildfire.
- Acquire and exchange lands within National Forest System boundaries to reduce islands and fingers of urban development within wildlands.
- Share information on how new developments adjacent to the national forests and grasslands may affect the ability to remove hazardous fuels from the public lands and increase risks for firefighters.

13 Research and share techniques to reduce the impacts of new developments on ecosystem functions, scenic values, public access, and forest-based economies.

- Research, develop, and share new designs, technologies, and techniques to help local planners and developers reduce the ecological impacts of new buildings, roads, and community infrastructure.
- Share landscape architecture techniques to help planners and developers maintain the scenic qualities of open space.
- Research and share information on how new developments adjacent to the national forests and grasslands may affect public access for recreation, wildlife habitat, and forest management.
- Communicate how the loss of open space increases the cost of managing national forests and grasslands and other public lands.
- Conduct research and share information about the economic and social benefits of maintaining large blocks of forest in private or community ownership.

A Living Strategy: Grassroots Action



This strategy will be implemented through a grassroots approach to encourage continual learning, innovations, and engagement by all levels of the Forest Service. Staff at the regions, research stations, the area, the institute, forests, districts, and other units will identify specific implementation steps in their strategic plans, business plans, and employee work plans. Implementation steps include:

- Continue to affirm and demonstrate open space conservation as a priority for the agency.
- Work with partners to raise public awareness of the importance of and threats to open space.
- Raise internal and external awareness of the Forest Service's role in open space conservation and linkages to National Forest System management.
- Coordinate across all parts of the agency to integrate and fully leverage Forest Service expertise, programs, and partnerships.
- Recognize and reward employee and partner accomplishments.
- Develop learning networks and online resources to facilitate the sharing of ideas and successes across the country.

To begin implementation, we have developed a new Web site: **http://www.fs.fed.us/openspace.** This site includes a wealth of specific ideas from the public on what the Forest Service can do to conserve open space.

The public input not only helped us set priorities as described above, but it will also help inform implementation. We will continually solicit more ideas from the public and from agency employees to keep this Web site current and relevant. The Web site also provides success stories, aerial images of open space loss, links to open space programs, publications, and other helpful resources.

Our goal is for this strategy to be a living document that inspires all Forest Service units, staffs, and employees to find ways to conserve open space as an integral, core part of their work. We will periodically revisit our national priorities, using new information from the public, to ensure that our open space efforts remain relevant and useful. This strategy is just the first step in the long and continuing involvement of the Forest Service in open space conservation.

Acknowledgements

This strategy was developed by a diverse team with representatives from different levels and parts of the agency. The team considered input from over 22,000 comments received from the public and from Forest Service employees. They also reviewed input from three focus group listening sessions held with partners and stakeholders in Washington, DC, North Carolina, and Colorado. Contributors include the following:

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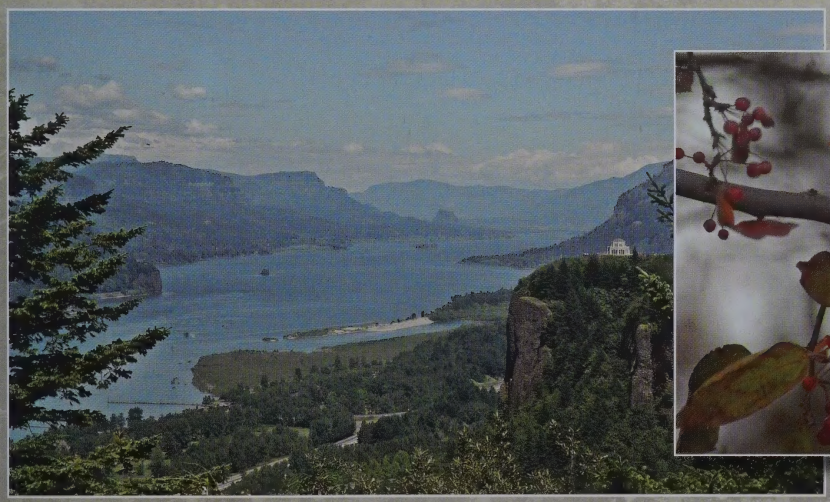

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